

Behind the Door

By PERCIVAL
WILDE

A Short
Short
Story

Illustrated by
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IT LOOKED easy, and it was easy. The second key in the bunch opened the basement door, and Benny found himself in the house. It was dark—very dark—and he stood still while his eyes accustomed themselves to the obscurity. Then, inch by inch, he edged to the stairs and up them to the main floor.

Here darkness yielded to a subdued lighting, and, flattening himself against the paneled walls, Benny paused again to take stock of the situation.

It was a venture in a field new to him. By inclination, by aptitude, by a love of the art which was so intense that he was usually engaged in scrawling on every flat surface within reach, he was a wielder of the pen, an expert in the production of signatures warranted to defy any but the closest inspection. His dexterity had been capitalized by bolder men who had directed him, had profited by his skill—and were now paying for their boldness behind steel bars.

Benny had escaped arrest, but he had lost his guides. Promptly he found himself starving, and, being a simple soul, hoped to remedy that condition in the most direct manner. Robison's house, he had heard in the underworld, contained a mass of treasure. There was a coin collection that filled many cases. That the house was guarded by a burglar alarm that was almost human was blissfully unknown to Benny. He flattered himself that his entrance was undetected.

The aroma of burning cigars was wafted to him from the near-by library. Now was the time to charge upon the inhabitants of the house with his pistol drawn—but the thought was abhorrent to him. Benny hated violence.

He was smiling over his problem when suddenly—so suddenly that he never quite understood how it happened—a ring of chilly metal touched the nape of his neck, and an even chillier voice bade him drop his revolver.

He followed orders—he was accustomed to doing that—and he shuffled

meekly into the library when his captor commanded him to do so.

It was a warm, cheerful place, and the stout man who sat in an easy chair, puffing at a cigar, looked warm and cheerful.

"Mister—" began Benny.

An icy voice at his back interrupted him. "I'm Robison," it said. Benny wheeled, and his heart dropped a beat. A tall, lean individual, with the thinnest lips and the beadiest eyes that Benny had ever seen, was covering him.

"Going to tell me it's your first time?" Robison sneered.

Benny nodded mutely.

"Wife and eleven children starving at home eh? Is the gun loaded?"

Benny nodded unhappily as Robison methodically verified the fact by breaking and recharging the weapon.

"I'd phone for the police," suggested the warm, cheerful man.

"Not yet," said Robison. He opened a closet door and pointed with his automatic. "Get in there," he said to Benny. "I'll be on the other side of this," he warned; "don't try to break it down."

The latch clicked, a key turned, and Benny sat down in utter darkness, to wonder what was to become of him. Disarmed, helpless, a prisoner, the future was unpromising. His hand stole into his pocket to caress the stub of a pencil—that was companionable.

He expected to hear a voice telephoning for the police. He heard it presently, but it was not telephoning. It was addressing the warm, cheerful man, and Benny was not the subject of the conversation. Stocks—the name of a railroad—Wall Street—the mysterious phrase "selling short." Queer!

The men outside began to raise their voices. "I've made you a fair offer," he heard Robison saying.

"It's not for you to say what's fair."

"I've told you my limit," shrielled Robison. "I won't pay another cent!"

Robison's identification could not have been more convincing

The warm, cheerful man laughed. "He who sells what isn't his'n," he quoted, "must buy it back or go to pris'n! You broke me five years ago, Robison, and I've been laying for you ever since. It's your turn to shell out now."

Abruptly Robison's voice rose to an excited screech: "I give you one minute to make up your mind! One minute!"

There was the sound of an overturned chair, and the cheerful man's voice was suddenly panic-stricken. "Put down that gun, Robison," it pleaded, "put it down!"

Then, muffled by the door between, came the report of a revolver shot, and Benny heard a heavy fall. He rose to his feet, quivering, trembling.

THE closed door was flung open, and a smoking weapon was thrust into his hand. He had a glimpse of the room beyond. He saw a body sprawled on the floor and he noticed a pool of red lending sudden life to the somber colors of a Persian rug.

"Quick," came Robison's command, "out with you!"

Benny did not pause to reason. He knew only that he wanted to leave the place without delay.

He took the gun. He burst out of the house. He plunged down the steps.

Before he could reach the pavement he was gathered in by a pair of policemen who had heard the shot and who wanted to find out what it meant.

Robison's identification could not have been more convincing.

"This is the man," he said positively. "I was talking with Holloway when he broke in, waving a gun. He aimed it

at me. He was about to fire when Holloway rushed him." He glanced at the body and wiped away a tear. "Gentlemen, Holloway was my dearest friend."

The police captain, who had been hastily summoned to Robison's library, frowned at the prisoner. He knew him.

"What have you got to say, Benny?" he demanded.

"That guy—he done it himself!" Benny's auditors snickered. "With your gun?"

"That's just what he done!" Benny saw the electric chair coming nearer and nearer. "Honest to God, I didn't croak nobody! Why, that guy caught me when I come in! He took the gat away from me! He locked me up in the closet—himself!"

"That's pure invention," said Robison calmly; "he wasn't in the closet."

The police captain crossed the room to the closet, observed its bare interior with a swift glance, and returned. "Go on, Mr. Robison," he invited.

"It's my word against the word of a criminal," Robison said confidently—"my word, and the fact that his gun, with one chamber empty, was found on him when you caught him. That ought to be enough."

"It's almost enough."

Robison's eyebrows lifted ever so slightly. "Almost? Almost?"

"Almost. If he was in the closet, he didn't commit the murder—and you swear he was never in the closet."

"I do!"

The captain slipped a pair of handcuffs on Robison's wrists. "Mr. Robison," he said, "you should have looked at the closet yourself. He's written his name on the inside of the door!"